

## MANAGING THE MIGRATION OF THE ARAB DEMOCRATIC WAVE

At present, there is an explosive lack of consensus within the EU about dealing with irregular migration from North Africa and the Middle East. With southern member states like Italy already experiencing increased irregular immigration, there has been a predictable sharpening of tone in many capitals. The imperative of restrictive immigration control has risen swiftly up the European agenda. At the same time, however, there has been a surprising openness toward liberalising EU migration policy.

It is a mark of the robustness of this liberal agenda that, even as concerns about higher levels of uncontrolled migration from North Africa and the Middle East grow, liberalisation is being advocated as a means of bringing stability and prosperity to the southern neighbourhood. The roots of this agenda stretch back to 2005, when the Union began to explore the foreign policy potential of immigration. Since then, there has been a growing sense that, by regulating international migration in a more enlightened way, the Union can promote goals such as regional prosperity and stability.

Over the past few years the EU has hit upon visa liberalisation and labour migration as ready means for promoting reform amongst its neighbours: the promise of visa liberalisation is used as a quid-pro-quo for justice sector improvements, and the resulting movement of people between the EU and its neighbours fosters cultural exchange. Similarly, temporary or 'circular' labour migration to the Union has been explored as a means of promoting economic development: workers from third countries will come to the EU for a short time before returning home armed with readily-available cash and expertise.

Yet, it is the eastern – rather than the southern – neighbours which have benefited most from this more liberal policy approach. Its advocates have



Would-be immigrants being rescued by the Italian Coast guard in the waters off the southern Italian island of Lampedusa

therefore looked at the unrest in the southern neighbourhood as some kind of vindication: if only the Union had taken a more enlightened approach to migration from the south, they argue, it might have fostered a smooth political and economic transformation in North Africa and the Middle East. The EU's highly restrictive and self-interested migration control policies have instead strengthened repressive forces in North Africa, set double standards and done nothing to alleviate the high incidence of youth unemployment in the region.

This week, therefore, several EU governments have advocated a more liberal approach towards Tunisia. European capitals are now weighing up a "mobility partnership" with Tunisia like that already afforded Moldova, Georgia and Cape Verde. Under this or a similar scheme, Tunisian migrants would be given greater scope to work temporarily in the EU. This, it is hoped, would give the Tunisian government a victory to sell at home, as well as opening the way to the development policy benefits attributed to temporary labour migration and offsetting the EU's heavy emphasis on migration control.

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At this point, though, it seems sensible to pause briefly and pose the question just how enlightened such an approach really would be. A quick analysis suggests that, in a strict sense, it would scarcely be a complement to the EU's foreign policy. That's because, if the eastern neighbourhood is anything to go by, such approaches have actually been a substitute for an EU foreign policy proper. Visa liberalisation has, for example, been used as a quid-pro-quo for political reform where the EU lacks other forms of conditionality and has become a means for spreading economic and social change where the EU lacks the usual foreign policy tools and resources.

This readiness to resort to home affairs tools where the EU lacks a robust foreign policy does not merely compromise the integrity of European home affairs, it also short-changes the EU's neighbours: it disrupts and politicises the EU's existing efforts to improve its visa practices, makes commitments to neighbours which European interior ministries then inevitably attempt to reverse, and robs the neighbourhood of more substantial European engagement. Moreover, it highlights just one side of the EU's increasingly erratic behaviour. For, it is not just that home affairs tools are being used to make up for deficits in EU foreign policy: the bloc's few foreign policy tools are increasingly being drafted into the gaps in EU home affairs.

For example, if the current European migration policy towards North Africa and the Middle East is highly restrictive, involves an unconscionable degree of burden-shifting, and has subsumed considerable diplomatic and development policy resources, it is largely because the Union is struggling to reach agreement on what to do with migrants when they reach the EU. As attempts to create a common European immigration and asylum policy lurch from one political limbo to another, EU members rightly wonder whether they could cope with a wave of migration from the south. These concerns encourage them to push migration control duties onto their North African neighbours.

In other words, rather than building up their own capabilities, the EU's home affairs actors pilfer from the bloc's foreign policy tools, and the EU's foreign policy actors pilfer from the bloc's home-affairs tools. This explains the current approach – the calls for the EU to use its foreign policy clout to push migration control right back into North Africa balanced out by calls for a liberalisation of migration to promote regional stability. It's a mess. The EU should instead concentrate on building up its classic foreign policy tools abroad and working towards a more harmonious European asylum and migration policy at home. It is the only way that a meaningful liberalisation of migration policy can occur.

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